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Review Essay: Recent Work on *2001: A Space Odyssey*



Simon Spiegel

Joe R. Frinzi. *Kubrick's Monolith. The Art and Mystery of 2001: A Space Odyssey*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2017. Paperback. 224 pp. \$29.95. ISBN 9781476664422.

Michael Benson. *Space Odyssey: Stanley Kubrick, Arthur C. Clarke, and the Making of a Masterpiece*. Simon & Schuster, 2018. Hardcover. 512 pp. \$30.00. ISBN 9781501163937.

FOR anyone interested in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (US/UK 1968), there has never been a lack of literature. In fact, the seminal science fiction epic has already been called the movie about which most has been written. Whether or not this is true, there is hardly any aspect of *2001* which has not been treated so far. Still, the 50th anniversary of its original release has seen a new wave of publications. Two of them are the subject of this review.

The books by Frinzi and Benson differ in goal, approach, and range. Frinzi's book can best be called an extensive appraisal by a lifelong fan. The author makes no effort to disguise the fact that he approaches *2001* as a devotee who wants to share his passion with his readers. His book tackles the film from different sides: there are chapters on the production and the people involved, on the special effects, on *2001*'s influence on later movies, and one specifically on the enigmatic Star-Gate sequence towards the end.

Space Odyssey, on the other hand, is a making-of which makes extensive use of archival and other previously unpublished material. Benson's book is by no means the first account of the film's production. Already in 1970, Jerome Agel published a making-of, and two years later, Kubrick's co-author Arthur C. Clarke put out *The Lost Worlds of 2001*, which covered his collaboration with the director. There have been more books since, mostly restricted by the fact that a lot of material was simply not accessible. This has changed dramatically since Kubrick's death in 1999. A plethora of material is now available at the Stanley Kubrick Archive at the University of the Arts in London. The first book on *2001* to make extensive use of this treasure trove was Piers Bizony's *The Making of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey*, published

in 2015.

Bizony's book, which originally appeared as a ludicrous limited edition weighing almost 20 pounds and was later re-released in a more compact version, covered the film's production in great detail. It is a testament to Benson's skill as a researcher that he is, despite the thoroughness of Bizony's book, able to come up with a lot of previously unknown details and actually shed some new light on the film's gestation.

Kubrick is often portrayed as a singular genius who simply had to put into reality the film that he envisioned in his head. As Benson shows, nothing could be further from the truth. Kubrick often had no clear idea what he wanted to achieve, but rather made his team come up with convincing ideas—ideas which he would reject most of the time. The director relied heavily on the creative input of his contributors, and one of his unsung qualities was his ability to discover new talents and push them to their limits—and beyond. While he also worked with experienced old hands, many young men, some of them with almost no previous experience in filmmaking, adopted central roles in the production of *2001*.

One effect of Kubrick's approach was that nothing about the final film was set in stone. Today's blockbusters are highly hierarchical enterprises, where each department has to follow clearly set requirements. *2001*, with a final budget of 10.5 million dollars, was also a large-scale production but was run more in the fashion of a theater workshop, where everything was up for change. The soundtrack, the final design of the monolith, many of the special effects, the crucial scene where HAL lipreads the astronauts' conversation, the enigmatic ending—none of these elements, and many more, were part of the original screenplay. They were rather the result of Kubrick's unorthodox iterative process.

While this approach ultimately led to great results, it was, for many of Kubrick's collaborators, also extremely exhausting, and as much as Kubrick relied on his team, when it came to cashing in, he became very close-fisted. This proved to be especially true for Clarke. The SF writer was, without any doubt, one of the most important influences on the film. Still, Kubrick basically shortchanged his co-author. Not only was Clarke (at the time, battling financial problems) obliged to hold back the publication of the novel based on the screenplay until the release of the film—a date which was continuously delayed—but he had also no share in the film's profits. Kubrick, on the other hand, got 40 percent of the novel's gains. Likewise, he took the

credit (and subsequently the Academy Award) for the film's special effects which, in all fairness, should have gone to Douglas Trumbull.

Even for *2001* aficionados, *Space Odyssey* offers many new insights. It features considerably fewer illustrations than Bizony's tome, but as a look behind the scenes, it is the superior book. From an academic point of view, it has only one real weakness: Benson hardly ever names his sources. Although there is no reason to doubt the veracity of his account, this makes life unnecessarily difficult for potential subsequent researchers.

Frinzi also writes about the film's production, but comparing these parts to Benson's book is quite unfair. Frinzi undertook no primary research but had to rely on existing literature. Accordingly, he comes up with hardly any new insights in this regard. For anyone mainly interested in the genesis of *2001*, Benson offers much more.

Kubrick's Monolith seems to be intended as a general introduction for a non-specialized audience. For these readers, chapters like the one on the film's symbolism, in which Frinzi discusses the monolith and, more generally, its dominant shapes and its images of birth and death, are probably beneficial; but for anyone more familiar with the film, there is little new or exciting. This is especially true for two chapters called "The Star-Gate Explained" and "Watching Kubrick's Odyssey. The Cinematic Experience." Neither chapter really delivers what its title promises: we get neither an explanation of the film's most baffling sequence nor a true account of how *2001* was or is experienced by its viewers. What these chapters offer is rather detailed step-by-step descriptions of the film, embellished with some additional thoughts.

Considering the vast existing literature on Kubrick's film, it is, of course, difficult to come up with a new angle. Funnily enough, the most original chapter in Frinzi's book is the one in which he, in the fashion of a true fan, compares the various soundtracks which have been published since the film's original release. Here he actually discusses something which has not yet been talked about ad nauseam.

The two books will certainly not be the last published on *2001*, but while *Kubrick's Monolith* probably won't have a lasting effect on coming publications, Benson's book will in all likelihood become the new standard reference when it comes to the film's production.